

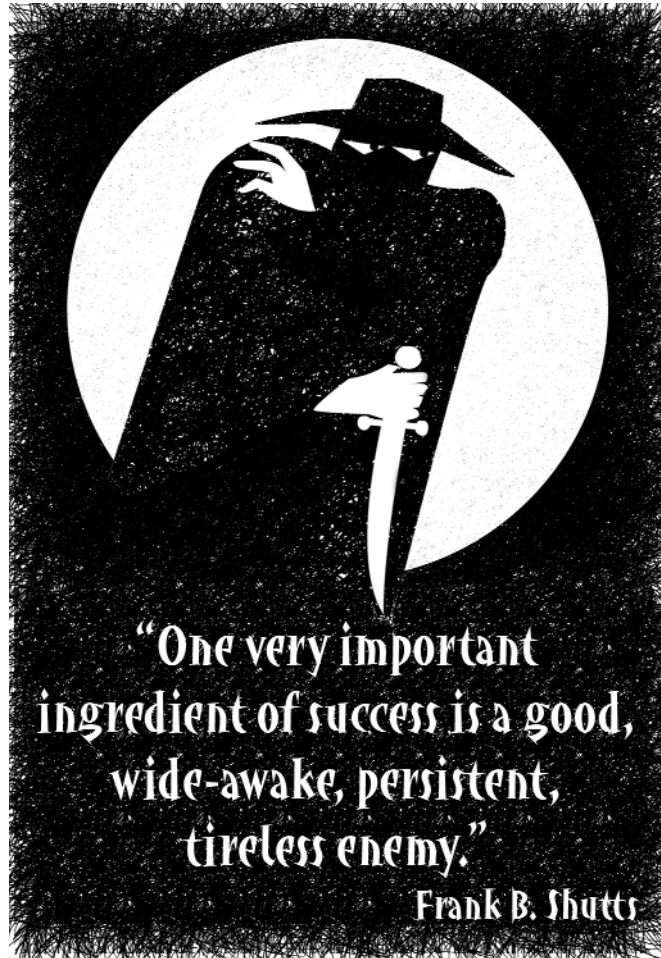
Villains – The Necessary Evil?

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After exploring the topic of heroics (*Program Manager*, Sept.-Dec. 2003), it seemed only natural to investigate the flip side—villainy. Just as heroes and heroines are essential to organizational success, so too, villains, bad guys, enemies, and monsters play an important role in the plotlines of our organizational dramas.

According to the late Army Col. Frank B. Shutts, founder and owner of the *Miami Herald*, “One very important ingredient of success is a good, wide-awake, persistent, tireless enemy.” Since villains are so significant, program managers would do well to understand the types of villains they may encounter and the various contributions of those villains to programmatic success. The most fortunate and effective PMs will square off against a persistent arch enemy who is strong enough to be a challenge—and flawed enough to be beaten.

Villains come in many shapes and sizes. We are going to look at the methods, strengths, and weaknesses of three major villain types that PMs may encounter. Every villain has a soft underbelly of sorts that must be identified, studied, and exploited. But it’s important to understand that these villains can’t be defeated using their own methods because each method is inherently flawed and is an ir-



removable component of what make these actors villains in the first place.

The Evil Genius

This type of villain is intent on domination and control: Darth Vader, Cruella DeVil, Superman’s Lex Luthor, and Adolf Hitler. Although they are often external to an organization, PMs sometimes encounter the Evil Genius within their organizations, typically in a different division.

Evil Geniuses always have an Evil Plan, and their primary weakness is their arrogant overconfidence in that plan. Arrogance is almost never useful, and when exercised to a villainous degree, it makes inherent weaknesses and flaws virtually invisible to their owner. Evil Geniuses cannot comprehend that their Evil Plans might be flawed, nor can they en-

tertain the possibility of a fatal weakness in their own abilities. Knowing this is the key to defeating the Evil Genius.

The Duke of Wellington explained his success against Napoleon’s marshals this way: “They planned their campaigns just as you might make a splendid set of harnesses. It looks very well; and answers very well; until it gets broken; and then you are done for. Now I made my campaigns of ropes. If anything went wrong, I tied a knot and went on” (quoted by William Fraser in *Words on Wellington*). As if to prove the Duke’s point, in correspondence to Marshal Murat, Napoleon bragged—prior to his defeat—about making plans three or four months in advance: “Nothing succeeds in war except in consequence of a well-prepared plan. It is my custom to leave nothing to chance.” His arrogant confidence in his own planning ability and his refusal to consider the possibility of flaws directly led to Napoleon’s downfall. Convinced he’d cov-

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ered all eventualities, Napoleon was unprepared to respond to the unexpected. *Sic semper tyranus.*

The Destructive Monster

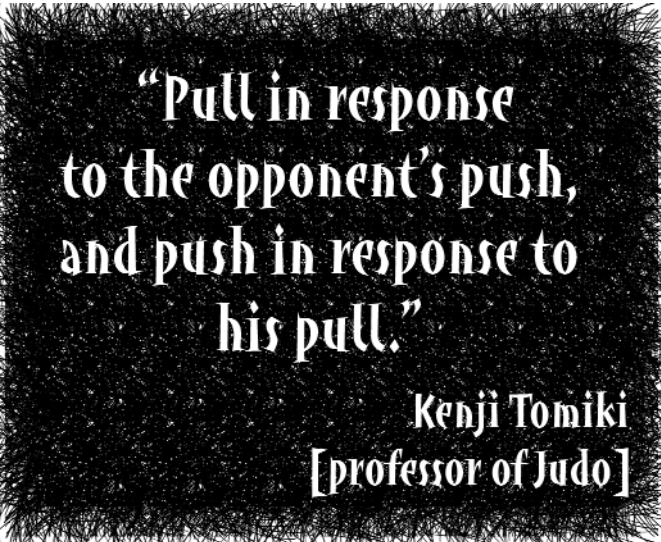
The Destructive Monster is focused solely on negative goals such as destruction or assimilation. Think the Borg from *Star Trek*, Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings*, Glenn Close's Alex in *Fatal Attraction*, and Osama Bin Laden. Their modus operandi is a blunt frontal assault with overwhelming force. Heedless of collateral damage or even self-inflicted wounds, these villains charge ahead, blind to the counterproductive nature of their approach. They don't realize that destruction as a goal is ultimately *self* destructive.

Destructive Monsters are typically external to a PM's organization, and once on the scene, their behavior is fairly predictable. They try to intimidate: they smash and stomp things; they breath fire or shoot laser beams out of their eyes; they boil your pet bunny. Finesse isn't their strong point, so a reasonably intelligent PM should be able to out-think this kind of villain. The trick is to avoid getting hit over the head while doing so.

Destruction cannot be sustained as an objective for any length of time, so the key to defeating this kind of villain is patient endurance, creative maneuvering, and exploitation of the villain's weakness, which can be found by examining his or her strength. The seemingly irresistible momentum developed by these villains can be turned against them in an application of the Judo principle of *ju-no-ri* (the principle of gentleness). Professor of Judo Kenji Tomiki explains it this way: "Pull in response to the opponent's push and push in response to his pull. ... while yielding to the force of the opponent's action upon you, you break his balance by striking at the weak point in his posture." Rather than going for direct opposition and confrontation, using *ju-no-ri* enables a PM to take advantage of the villain's mindless approach with maximum effectiveness.

The Criminally Incompetent

No one epitomizes this kind of villain better than Dilbert's Pointy-Haired Boss. The intentions of the Criminally Incompetent are usually unclear, and they are blind to the destruction they cause. However, Criminally Incompetents are also convinced they're in control and everyone else is inept. They tend to be ineffective in meaningful endeavors but all *too* effective at being disruptive. These



"Pull in response
to the opponent's push,
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Kenji Tomiki
[professor of Judo]

villains can be found everywhere and are most disconcerting when they show up in an otherwise competent team or program office. However, like the proverbial village idiot, the Criminally Incompetent, in fact, serves a useful social purpose.

The unexpected and interesting thing about Criminally Incompetents is that defeating or removing them isn't necessarily the best approach. Writing in the *Journal of Abnormal and*

Social Psychology, Stanley Schacter says, "The presence of a disruptive, incompetent deviant in an otherwise competent decision-making group enhances the quality of the work by the total group." He goes on to explain that removing an "incompetent deviant" from the group actually decreases the quality of the group's output and, even more surprisingly, tends to result in a previously competent team member's assuming the role. The implication for PMs is that an incompetent team member may not be a bad thing—indeed, counter intuitive as it may seem, he or she could even be a positive influence.

Villainy—It's Not All Bad

Like any leader, a PM's primary responsibility is to communicate a vision and direct the team towards a clearly defined, meaningful goal. Good PMs know how to point their teams in the right direction. Great PMs point them towards great villains. Why? Because villains contribute.

Schwerpunkt

Even the most noble mission can be helped by a weighty opponent, according to management überguru Warren Bennis, who explains that "most organizations have an implicit mission to destroy an adversary, and that is often more motivating than their explicit mission." The presence of a villain sharpens team members' focus and synchronizes their efforts. Defeating the villain becomes the clear goal for the entire team.

Since motivation and organizational focus are key attributes of high performance work groups, anything a PM can do to increase both will increase the group's effectiveness. The German word for this type of focus is *Schwerpunkt*, a term often used by the late Air Force Col. John Boyd in his influential work on decision making cycles (OODA—Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action—Loops) and defined by Boyd biographer Robert Coram as "the glue that holds together various units." *Schwerpunkt* is as important in program offices as in combat units, and

PMs can reinforce Schwerpunkt by continually reminding the team of the villain's presence.

Cooperation and Communication

One of the most beautiful facts of human nature is that shared strife and common struggle tends to bring people together—the nation's response to 9/11 pointedly illustrates this fact. In novelist Frankfort Moore's words, "There is no stronger bond of friendship than a mutual enemy." The Great Communicator Ronald Reagan understood this when he described the USSR as "an evil empire." Not only did he rally a morale-deprived nation still recovering from Vietnam and faced with high inflation and unemployment, but he also established a resurgence of strong cooperation against a common enemy among the western allies in NATO.

Even the best teams can occasionally struggle to work together the way they should and in the absence of an official bad guy may treat each other as opponents. But as soon as a designated villain enters the scene, barriers and hesitations start to melt away. When a common enemy threatens, people tend to close ranks, set aside previous differences, and pull together.

Individual Development

A growth-oriented office benefits individual members and the team as a whole. The effective PM creates an environment where such growth is encouraged and desirable. One of the things that sustains this climate is the perpetual presence of the enemy at the gate.

Gazelles have to be fast because cheetahs are fast, and vice versa. Slow members of either community don't last very long, and a reduction in the average speed of one group will likely result in reduced speed in the other. A worthy opponent makes you stronger, illuminates your weak spots, and acts as a catalyst for self-development. Keeping a well managed cheetah within your environment or pointing out cheetahs outside the fence can raise the bar and make all your gazelles run a better race.

Self-knowledge

Athenian philosopher Antisthenes wrote, "Observe your enemies, for they first find out your faults." If self knowledge is of any value to PMs (and it is), then listening to your opponents is one of the smartest things you can do. A strong villain will constantly seek out the hero's weaknesses, and in the long run, this actually does the good guy a favor. We can't fix a problem we don't see, and we seldom seek out our weaknesses on our own.

Warning: Find, Don't Fabricate

Because villains contribute to team performance, some PMs may be tempted to consistently play devil's advocate with their team or to set themselves up as a catalyzing opponent. But while villains may be a necessary

evil, you cannot advance the cause of goodness by becoming a villain yourself. By doing so you relinquish both the moral authority to lead and the functional capacity for defining the team's objectives. Villains play an important role, but it is not a role a PM should step into. Our advice to PMs is this: make sure your team has a good villain, and make sure it's not you.

While villains are not usually in short supply, a team may occasionally find itself without an opponent, and the PM must identify one. Resist the urge to villainize a potential ally. Far better to bring such a person onto the team in some fashion. Rather than creating a new villain, the wiser approach is to identify a pre-existing one. Look around for people, organizations, and ideas that are genuinely opposed to your objectives and can serve as a focal point for your team to combat. Perhaps the enemy will be a group like the Taliban. Perhaps it will be the sinister forces of schedule delays, cost overruns, or performance shortfalls. Or perhaps it will be The Bureaucracy itself. The point is to identify a villain your team can directly assault, preferably with measurable outcomes.

The Heroic Response to Villainy

G. K. Chesterton pointed out that "the true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him." Losing sight of what is being defended is the first step towards losing the battle. Therefore, as PMs point their teams towards a confrontation with a powerful villain, they must emphasize the good that is being defended and not merely the evil that is to be defeated.

Unlike Evil Geniuses, we fight to bring freedom, not domination. Unlike Destructive Monsters, we fight not only to destroy, but to protect. And unlike the Criminally Incompetent, heroic PMs know what they are about – providing this country with the technical means necessary to ensure the interests of liberty and democracy around the world.

The Last Word: Thank You

Martial arts opponents bow to each other before and after practice or a match. Judo Master Jigoro Kano explains, "Bowing is an expression of gratitude and respect. In effect, you are thanking your opponent for giving you the opportunity to improve your technique."

So even as you battle your villains, remember to thank them too.

Editor's Note: When not off fighting villains, the authors welcome comments and questions. Quaid can be reached at quaidsofsw@aol.com and Ward at wardd@nima.mil.